

SO MANY MESSES TO CLEAN UP

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* Missouri's role at the dawn of the nuclear age now requires a safe, sustainable environmental cleanup.

It was the spring of 1942 - two years after German scientists first confirmed the power from splitting atoms, and just a few months after the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. The U.S. government was desperate to develop an atomic bomb.

Under the gathering storm clouds of war, Dr. Arthur Compton, a Nobel Laureate from Washington University, lunched on April 17 with Edward Mallinckrodt Jr., head of the Mallinckrodt Chemical Co. Compton explained why uranium was needed for the war effort. Like countless patriotic Missourians before and since, Mallinckrodt agreed to help. By December, Missouri workers had produced enough uranium to supply Enrico Fermi's reactor in Chicago -- the first step in the Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb.

From that quiet lunch, Missouri's role in building the U.S. nuclear arsenal expanded to include a decade of uranium production in downtown St. Louis, uranium waste disposal at North County sites, another decade of uranium production at the Weldon Spring site in St. Charles County and a nuclear factory near Hematite in Jefferson County that supported U.S. Navy nuclear submarines. Some work remains classified to this day.

Now we are facing the long-lived legacy of these nuclear weapons operations. A dedicated crew at the Weldon Spring site has nearly completed cleanup there. And since taking over the job in 1997, the Army Corps of Engineers has made enormous progress in cleaning up the St. Louis waste sites. The cleanup of the Hematite site is just beginning, however. This delay brings with it tragic consequences to the families whose wells have been tainted by the toxic leftovers of the federal government's nuclear operations there.

Despite the progress, much work remains. Fortunately, Missouri's congressional delegation is helping force the federal Energy Department to deal with the residual groundwater contamination at Weldon Spring. Also, we are working to make sure that the federal government meets its long-term obligations and does not leave Missouri with a giant unfunded mandate. Similarly, we are now entering a crucial stage to ensure that the St. Louis cleanup is completed in a way that supports community land use.

Every day in Missouri we are proving that economic and environmental health go hand-in-hand. We see this with regular low-tech and new high-tech businesses operating with a sound environmental ethic.

Regrettably, we also see examples where skimping on environmental protection bears the bitter fruit of economic calamity for families and entire communities. In north St. Louis, for example, the Army abandoned a contaminated ammunition plant nearly 10 years ago. The cleanup delays have stifled efforts to develop the site safely and replace the 5,000 jobs that were lost when the Army moved out.

Because radioactive waste will outlast us all, we owe it to future generations of Missourians to build a vigorous program that does more than organize a perpetual maintenance and monitoring operation at these sites. We must insist that a serious investment be made to address the fundamental scientific and engineering challenges related to this waste.

Properly supported scientific research may lead to better cleanup and surveillance methods and a better understanding of the potential health impacts. We must ensure that the federal government builds information systems detailing exactly where any residual contamination is located. Only in this way can people be protected and will future investors and insurers have the confidence to help develop these parcels.

Finally, we must insist that the federal government provide adequate reliable funding to support this work.

In the future, before allowing the federal government to sully our soil, we must insist that the environmental consequences be fully considered. Uncle Sam should play by the same environmental rules imposed on private companies. Self-regulation by the federal government has failed miserably and should end.

Being a pioneer is not easy. Missouri's pioneering at the dawn of the nuclear age now demands development of a sustainable environmental cleanup. Expedient and near-sighted cut-and-run environmental projects will only kick the nuclear can down the road to another generation. This is not what pioneers do.

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